

# Working the Interstices: Adult basic education teachers respond to the audit culture

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## Abstract

This paper provides the perspectives of adult basic education (ABE) teachers on how they are responding to curriculum changes which form part of the regulatory regime referred to as the audit culture. The focus is on ABE programs conducted in the vocational education and training (VET) sector in Australia where most accredited ABE courses are delivered. The paper indicates the many tensions ABE teachers experience between the compliance requirements of audits and their professional judgements as experienced ABE teachers. While responses vary, many teachers adopt an approach where they can comply with the prescriptive demands of audits, though often in a minimal fashion, and at the same time teach in a way that fits within their philosophy and practices as ABE teachers. In the classroom these teachers are seen to be ‘working the interstices’ (the small ‘spaces’) in the official curriculum. Concern was expressed, however, that future ABE teachers may not adopt such an approach.

## Introduction

An interstice can be defined as ‘an intervening space’ or ‘a small or narrow space between things or parts: a small chink, crevice or opening’ (Macquarie Concise Dictionary 1992:506). ‘Working the interstices’ was a phrase I used as the heading for the final section of my PhD thesis submitted almost a decade ago (Black 2001:282-286). My argument then was that, for teachers working within the tight curriculum parameters of workplace literacy programs in the neo-liberal/conservative education era of the late 1990s, there was, nevertheless, always space for critique, even if it involved an element of deception. As I stated at the time, ‘It may mean giving the impression of playing the dominant game while diverting at times from the prescribed curriculum and engaging in a critical agenda’ (Black 2001:283). The context for such comments was the prevailing absence of critical accounts of Australian workplace literacy programs and the perception that adult basic education (ABE) teachers were not engaging sufficiently with the discourses of human capital and economic rationalism. One study of ABE pedagogy stated, ‘Their position could perhaps be characterised as a mute opposition beneath a passive acquiescence’ (Lee and Wickert 1995:145).

The context for this current paper shifts to more than a decade on, and it features ABE teachers involved not just in workplace literacy programs, but more broadly, in mainstream ABE programs conducted in technical and further education (TAFE) colleges, the main public vocational education and training (VET) institutions where most accredited ABE programs in Australia are delivered. The central message of ‘working the interstices’, however, remains, except that this time, rather than being promoted by the author, the voices of ABE teachers themselves are heard in various ways expressing this message.

To date, few studies have considered in a critical way how ABE teachers respond to the broader curriculum discourses they are expected to work within. This paper reports on a small study, conducted with individuals and small groups of ABE teachers, which begins to explore what they think about, and how they respond to, the constraints of the curriculum they are employed to teach. The paper is framed largely within the current compliance measures of the regulatory regime described as an ‘audit culture’ in VET.

### **The audit culture in VET**

It has been argued recently that the scale of compliance with audit requirements has transformed the work of teachers in the VET system, and that this aspect of VET work has not been recognised sufficiently by researchers, thus leading to the perception that it represents, ‘the elephant in the room’ (Black and Reich 2010). Audits have been referred to as ‘the use of business derived concepts of independent supervision to measure and evaluate performance by public agencies and public employees ...’ (Leys 2003, cited in Apple 2007:7). Power (1997), a key authority on audits, explains that in the United Kingdom from the late 1980s there was an ‘audit explosion’ in which, ‘a growing population of ‘auditees’ began to experience a wave of formalised and detailed checking up on what they do’ (Power 1997:3). Audits are now common place worldwide and essentially they are promoted as a means of reducing risk and providing value for money, especially in public sector management contexts. By applying the accounting principles of the business world, audits are designed to regulate the activities of public officials. So pervasive are the regulatory mechanisms of audits in various fields, and especially public education systems, that the term ‘audit culture’ has become a popular descriptive term (see Apple 2007, Hodgkinson 2008, Shore and Wright 1999, Strathern 2000). In the context of this paper, the term audit culture is used quite broadly to encapsulate the massive increase in ‘paperwork’ that ABE teachers in VET are required to undertake as part of their role as teachers. It includes, for example, the emphasis on documenting many aspects of the assessment of learners and course

outcomes, the continual checking and verifying that all elements of the curriculum and the participation of students have been complied with during the delivery of courses, and providing documentation to prove this to both internal and external auditors.

The audit culture is particularly dominant in VET systems, and especially in relation to the British further education (FE) sector, due in part to the relatively low status of the sector and the insecure and highly competitive basis for much of its funding (see Avis 2007, Hodkinson 2008). Hence, FE colleges in the United Kingdom spend considerable time collecting data to 'prove' their performance and to meet the demands of internal peer reviewers and external inspectors from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). The result has been a marked intensification of work in the FE system with teachers 'drowning under paperwork' (Ainley and Bailey 1997: 62).

There has been similar audit culture dominance in Australian VET for more than the past decade as governments and industry together have sought to establish a national VET system. In order to deliver nationally accredited courses all VET providers, public and private, are required to become Registered Training Organisations (RTOs). These organisations are subject to national, standardised regulation under the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF), a system of quality assurance focused 'squarely on training and assessment, client service and management systems' (Australian Quality Training Framework 2008 cited in Seddon 2009:69). One researcher describes the AQTF indicators as invoking, 'blunt top-down instruments that demand systemic conformity with non-discipline-specific, externally developed documentation for verifying generalised provider compliance with legislative requirements' (Tudor 2009:79). This accountability system promotes industry perspectives to the exclusion of educational stakeholders, and according to one leading VET researcher, for the VET teachers, 'There is compliance but not commitment' (Seddon 2009:69).

For VET teachers in Australia and overseas, there appear to be two main issues of contention. Firstly, there is a considerable increase in workload and stress resulting from time spent working on computer-based audit procedures. Respondents in a study of head teachers in TAFE NSW said audits were a 'nightmare', and typically, one manager stated, '... no matter how hard I work, I know I am not meeting all the audit requirements' (see Black 2009:15). But the issues for teachers are not just about work intensification and increased 'paperwork'. In this highly regulated environment with ever closer surveillance of their work, VET teachers are lamenting their loss of control over what is taught. Avis (2007:99) in the British FE context states that, as a result of this closer surveillance, 'spaces for autonomy have become severely circumscribed'. Following a similar line of argument, Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2009), while not referring

specifically to the VET system, suggest the need to ‘mind the gap’ that has developed between the subjectivity of teacher professional judgement and the objectivity measures of standardised audit processes. The argument is that teacher professional judgement is being diminished through the need to comply with regulatory audit processes which are often presented as unquestioned ‘quality assurance’. Hodkinson (2008), also referring to the British FE system, draws attention to a similar dichotomy. He refers to the ‘ecologies of practice’ of the teachers conflicting with the audit driven ‘economies of performance’ of the national and college systems. As a result of this conflict, we find ‘underground working’, the work teachers undertake in VET which is not part of their official employment contract.

This tension between on the one hand, teacher professional autonomy, and on the other hand, audit regulation, is the key issue in this paper. Some educational researchers have framed this tension within a broader politics, seeing the audit culture largely as a manifestation of neo-liberal/conservative ideology; a means of controlling and regulating public officials in the interests of ruling capitalist groups (see, for example, Apple 2007, Shore and Wright 1999). Applying such a perspective to Australian VET, for example, we see that the vocational content of courses is based on government sponsored training packages developed by leading industry councils representing largely private industry. Through the regulatory mechanisms of the AQTF and the RTO status of providers, the audit culture in effect ensures that VET practitioners teach only that which is prescribed in these training packages. Assessment validation, for example, a fairly recent audit mechanism, regulates the work of teachers by ensuring teachers use assessments that do not deviate from the prescribed curriculum unit purposes and outcomes. On the face of it, there would appear to be little flexibility left for teacher autonomy.

Interestingly though, especially in view of the title and theme of this current paper, Avis (2007:125) concludes his analysis of the British FE system by making the point that while curriculum embodies the interests of those with power in society, and while the regulatory mechanisms of the audit culture ensure compliance, curriculum is nevertheless:

... accomplished through classroom processes and subject to a series of mediations by teachers and learners. It is this very indeterminacy that offers a space for struggle as well as outcomes that are contrary to those of policy makers and curriculum designers.

Further, Lawy and Tedder (2009) have recently demonstrated in relation to FE teacher training in Britain, that agency in the cases of both experienced and relatively new FE professionals is not necessarily closed down by regulatory audit regimes.

## ABE teachers and the audit culture

ABE teachers, especially those who are part of VET systems, have long been subject to similar types of professional conflict as those outlined above. Merrifield (1998), in a US publication, set the scene more than a decade ago, indicating the ‘contested’ nature of the trends to performance accountability in adult basic education. More recently, Campbell (2007) has drawn together many international perspectives on the complex issues of assessment and accountability in ABE.

The ‘Skills for Life’ strategy for improving basic skills in the United Kingdom, with its focus on largely human capital outcomes, has been the focus for some critical discussion in relation to its prescriptive, evidence-based reporting frameworks (see Cuban 2009:8-10). Tusting (2009) has recently provided a detailed account of how some ABE teachers are resisting elements of the accountability regime of the ‘Skills for Life’ curriculum with its core curriculum and prescriptive outcomes. She refers to the massive increase in ‘paperwork’, and how teachers are struggling to maintain their valued practices as ‘good’ ABE teachers, by which she refers to the need to respond to learner needs, negotiate learning, and be flexible ‘in the teaching moment’. Other British studies have also indicated the growing discontent of basic skills teachers in a VET sector which has been subject to ‘endless’ policy changes in the past decade or more (for example, Edward, Coffield, Steer and Gregson 2007). Similar to some of the VET researchers cited previously in this paper, Hamilton (2008) focuses on the effects of these policy changes and audit requirements on reducing the space for professional judgement and decision making and thus limiting teacher (and student) agency. But while outlining how such spaces for autonomy have been reduced, Hamilton (2008), like Avis (2007:125) cited above, also acknowledges that teachers still maintain agency:

Nonetheless, tutors (*ABE teachers*) are still – inevitably – enrolled as active agents in change, through the mediating role they play in managing student identities and progress minute by minute through the lifelong learning infrastructure.

In fact, not only are ABE teachers acknowledged to have some continuing autonomy in the face of a dominating audit culture, but they may also have the possibility for ‘subversion’. As Hamilton, Hillier and Tett (2006:10) note, as important elements of the audit culture such as performance indicators attempt to shape the field of ABE:

These requirements also have unintended effects as people react to the demanding and messy day-to-day realities of filing returns, filling in individual learning plans with students, or mustering evidence about achievement within busy schedules. Impossible demands almost set people up to subvert them.

Merrifield (2006:161) appears to add to this perspective, and also links with the title of this current paper by suggesting that there are opportunities for teachers to cross boundaries: 'There are cracks within the system, boundaries are more permeable than they look ...'

In Australia, only occasionally in the research literature is an ABE teacher's voice heard complaining about the undue administrative burden they now face in implementing particular ABE programs (for example, Doemling 2005:6-7), and occasionally such perspectives are presented at a national organisational level when demands for accountability are seen to threaten the integrity of educational provision (Australian Council for Adult Literacy 2009). The ABE field, and indeed the VET field generally in Australia (with a couple of exceptions, see Black 2009, Black and Reich 2010), has lacked documented discussions over the effects of the audit culture on the work of VET teachers.

### **Research methods**

The data for this paper were obtained through two main methods. Firstly, the views of thirteen ABE head teachers on their changing work roles and responses to the audit culture were obtained through the selective extrapolation of qualitative survey data from a much larger study of the role of head teachers in TAFE NSW (see Black 2009). Head teachers play a significant role in TAFE colleges in New South Wales, as educational leaders, managers of their teaching sections, and as classroom teachers themselves. The data were based on an emailed survey questionnaire involving both open and closed questions which sought the views of head teachers on a wide range of issues relating to their changing role in recent years. Data for this paper were drawn from responses to open questions that were asked about how their role had changed in relation to audits, workloads and the degree of autonomy they felt they had in their role. A total of 109 head teachers across TAFE colleges throughout New South Wales responded to the survey, of which six stated they were ABE head teachers, and a further seven can be included in this sample from TAFE Institutes which use other terms such as Foundation Studies and Employment Preparation to describe what was once ABE. The survey data from these thirteen head teachers provide useful insights into how ABE pedagogy in a broader sense, which includes the frontline management of the teaching section, has changed in response to the audit culture.

The second method involved audio recorded, focus group discussions with mainly full time ABE teachers at three Australian TAFE colleges. Each of the three focus groups took between 60 and 90 minutes, and the tapes of the meetings were transcribed in full. Each focus group comprised approximately 10 respondents who formed the core teaching staff in the three

ABE teaching sections. With the agreement of each head teacher and their respective ABE teachers, the focus group replaced their weekly scheduled staff meeting. The focus questions asked respondents to reflect on how they had experienced changes in their role in recent years, including the type of programs they teach, what they teach, how they teach, the students they teach, how they comply with the demands of the curriculum, and whether their enjoyment/satisfaction with their role has changed. They were also asked about their views on the future of ABE pedagogy in VET.

The majority of respondents in both of the two research methods were female (in fact all of the focus group participants), and almost exclusively in the 50-59 years age category. The ABE head teachers had spent on average a decade in their current work role, and a likely similar statistic can be gauged for the focus group participants (though specific demographic data were not sought from focus group participants). All the teachers were long term and very experienced in ABE. There were no 'new' teachers to ABE in the focus groups due to the staffing stability of these teaching sections over many years. When occasionally a position did become available through retirement or a teacher transferring to another college, the successful new candidate had usually been a long term part time teacher in that section.

The qualitative data from both the survey questionnaire and the focus groups covered many aspects of change affecting pedagogy. For this paper, data were selected for analysis which focused on change in relation to the audit culture. The data were coded according to several key themes which comprise the headings of the 'Findings and discussion' section of this paper. They include: general participant responses to the new accountability regime; tensions experienced between audit compliance and professional teacher roles; workload and job satisfaction issues; emotional responses, including resentment, anger, and disillusionment; how teachers 'balanced' their professional teacher role with the need for audit compliance; and the future of ABE pedagogy in VET.

## **Findings and discussion**

### **The accountability regime**

Head teachers of ABE were more likely than regular ABE teachers to experience the pressures of audit compliance given their greater managerial/administrative role as heads of their teaching sections. Head teachers specifically mentioned compliance with: the AQTF, RTO status, ISO (International Organisation for Standards), internal audits, ICC (Internal Control Checklists) and a wide range of curriculum standards. In each case, compliance required verification in quantifiable ways that all elements of activities had been performed correctly, according to set standards, and that they would stand the scrutiny of auditors who may know little about

pedagogical processes. This focus on accountability and audits of various kinds has clearly become a central feature of ABE work. One head teacher commented:

We're now always being audited, either internally or externally, so that you always have this unseen audience there. Sometimes you feel they are ready to pounce, and so you need to make sure you are covered maybe for something that will never eventuate.

Similarly, another head teacher stated:

Audits appear to be never ending. There is no way we can question what we are being audited on. This year we were audited on learner support and the documentation we had to provide was unreasonable.

So audit-driven is this work, one head teacher commented that to do her job these days, 'an accounting degree would have equipped me better than my Dip Ed and various postgrads in education.' But audit processes are not just a matter for frontline managers, the ABE classroom teachers found their regular pedagogical roles had changed as well, especially in relation to the curriculum they were employed to teach. Comments from focus groups included:

It's all totally assessment-driven now.

The curriculum ... has taken control of identifying learner needs.

Formerly, and for many years in Australian VET systems, assessing learners in ABE was fairly straightforward and not a major focus. One popular ABE course involved just several modules/units and each of these units had the single aim for individual students to meet their personal goals which were to be negotiated with the teacher. Current ABE courses, by contrast, stipulate multiple learning outcomes for each unit undertaken, and the trend is for many units to be undertaken concurrently. Thus, ABE students may be enrolled in an ABE course with possibly six or more integrated units. In order to comply with the auditors, teachers need to be able to demonstrate that students have achieved the learning outcomes for each integrated unit (i.e. they are assessed as either 'competent' or 'not yet competent'). Further, for every teaching session, it needs to be documented exactly how students participated in each of the integrated units. Linked lesson plans need to indicate the content of each session, and how this content relates to the learning outcomes of each unit of work. In addition, teachers need to develop assessment tasks in order to determine if students have achieved competency or not in their enrolled units. These assessment tasks need to be 'validated', a peer review process that involves checking that



the assessment tasks relate to the learning outcomes for the unit and are appropriate for a group of students at the level of the course they are enrolled in. These assessment validations are standardised in their format and need to be signed by fellow teachers and stored in the event of an audit.

Compounding and including within these audit processes are budgetary factors where funding for courses is based on an ASH (actual student hours) formula. The aim in the highly competitive budgetary times of recent years is usually to maximise ASH figures in order to maintain funding for the ABE section, and the only way to do this is to increase the number of students in classes and/or increase the number of units they enrol in. This explains a couple of ABE teacher comments:

We are driven to putting in more outcomes and modules because of ASH, and it's just ridiculous ...

I don't remember the drive on ASH. It wasn't the ASH, it was the students' needs.

The result of this audit compliance for teachers is a huge increase in the time they spend documenting information that they consider may be of limited educational value, and which 'sit in a drawer, just in case, in case an auditor comes around.'

### **Tensions between audit compliance and ABE pedagogy**

In the research cited earlier, reference was made to the 'gap' or tensions between on the one hand, the standardised measures of audit compliance, and on the other hand, the subjective professional judgements of teachers. The findings in this research show these tensions everywhere in relation to the current work of ABE teachers. Head teachers, for example, provided examples of the priorities they are forced to make in their daily work and that time and time again by focusing on audit compliance, they neglected pedagogy and the principles that underpin their professionalism as ABE teachers. What follows are just some of the many examples of such tensions as expressed by head teachers:

Being an educator is not possible. We are trainers, assessors, RPL (recognition of prior learning) experts, workforce practitioners, Centrelink prison officers ...

The fact that audits wag the tail of everything we do means we have to focus on auditable tasks when we could be focusing on promoting courses and designing curriculum.

This year my section has had an internal audit and last year an internal audit and an ISO audit. The pressure is always on to have all the paperwork up to date in case of an upcoming audit.

As a result of this, quality teaching and learning has taken a back seat.

Other head teachers spoke of their neglect of their own staff, with so little time to mentor new teachers and even meet with their staff, 'Really sitting down and having time to think through things ...' One head teacher said he was constantly thinking of all the administrative tasks he needed to undertake out of class, 'when I should be on the way to class.'

Sometimes audit processes were seen to have a direct negative effect on sound pedagogical principles. For example, one head teacher commented on a 'youth at risk' program:

... they're required to have a report on every student, every fortnight. [they are] Supposed to show how their goals have changed every fortnight, which is not only educationally unsound, it will frighten the students away.

The 'gap' between audit compliance and teacher professional judgement can be seen at a broader level too. Some teachers spoke of the absence of discussions about pedagogy generally. One stated:

We don't speak about pedagogy much, but I don't think anybody does either. I haven't seen new ideas around at all, reading theory, writing theory, what's new? Maybe it's there, but we're not seeing it. No professional development, no one speaks about pedagogy anymore.

It was as though the priorities of being a VET teacher had moved beyond pedagogy to ensuring that systems worked and the auditors were happy. One teacher commented, 'Auditors are ruling aren't they, basically.'

Some ABE teachers spoke about the absence in particular of 'critical literacy' in the classroom and they related this to curriculum changes, with prescriptive learning outcomes for students and the need to document evidence of participation and performance. Critical literacy skills are not so easily documented and there was the feeling it was neglected in the current curriculum as the following two comments from ABE teachers suggest:

I feel that the critical literacy kind of got lost along the way and there's nothing within the curriculum that promotes it and reinforces it. (to which another teacher in a focus group responded: 'because they don't want people to think, you just toe the line')

If you came in and observed what happens in classrooms now, you'd see a lot of computer-based stuff, meeting individual needs, but also worksheet type stuff on computers ... I don't

think you'd see the same sort of critical literacy that we flirted with a few years ago ...

Again, at a broader level, the 'gap' between audit compliance and teacher professional judgement can be seen to be at least partly responsible for the fragmentation of the field of ABE. In a competitive funding environment where efficiencies in the form of dollars per ASH formulas and achieving key performance targets distinguish some sections as better performing than others, cooperation between colleges and between individual teaching sections is not necessarily encouraged. One ABE teacher stated:

We used to have interdisciplinary meetings where people, you know, everyone got together on a regular basis from ABE. And then they started splitting up the Institutes and the colleges. Now, do we know another college exists? No. Do we ever meet them? No.

Another teacher commented:

'It seems to me we've been fragmented out of existence.'

### **Work intensification and job satisfaction**

As some overseas studies have shown, and as previous work on head teachers in VET (Black 2009) demonstrated, the most tangible consequence of audit compliance is an increase in workload. One ABE teacher commented, 'Everything is much more frenetic than it used to be ... lot more admin, accountability, the constant bits of paperwork, the constant audits, they all impinge on the amount of time you have ...' Another teacher stated, 'I actually feel sick to the stomach at times with all the extra admin. Everything seems to be done at a rush ...' Typically, one teacher said of the current curriculum, 'There's no way we can get through all the learner outcomes'. Other teachers complained of the constant pressures for improved performance, which inevitably led to doing more with less. Class sizes, for example, had increased: 'A 6:1 class would now be a 10:1. What was 10 would now be 15, 16, 17 ...' One teacher spoke of trying to combine two classes to enable team teaching, but class numbers prevented this: 'the number of people in the room, it became physically stressful and unmanageable.'

But the respondents in this study indicated it wasn't just a workload issue, it was the nature of work in an audit culture. For head teachers in particular this seemed a significant issue affecting their morale. One said, 'Most days I feel I am a well paid clerk'. Another detailed the tedious nature of much of the head teacher's work and the effects it had on some head teachers:

The constant fear of audits, especially chilling stories from colleagues of what they had to undergo for an external audit, ensures head teachers comply reluctantly. Constant change, especially curriculum change and perennial electronic system changes ensure head teachers can never relax and look beyond to adopt a broader perspective on their work. Instead, they are mired in internal, inward-looking administrative trivia that in time destroys even the most enthusiastic and skilled of head teachers. It's sad to see.

Another head teacher similarly stated:

Absolutely everything has changed, everything that made the job satisfying has been reduced and in most cases eliminated. Key performance indicators are driving our lives and ruining the quality of work, services, products and our capacity to assist students.

### **Lack of trust, resentment, anger, disillusionment**

As the literature (e.g. Power 1997) indicates, ostensibly, by regulating the work of public officials, audits are designed to reduce the possible misuse of public resources and thus reduce risk and encourage trust in the management and operation of public services. By enforcing audit compliance, this demonstrated for some ABE teachers a lack of trust in them and their professional expertise. As one ABE teacher clearly articulated, 'the thing that annoys me is always having to validate stuff, verify stuff. Nobody trusts us as professionals anymore, which I find a bit sad actually, really do.' Following on from this, another teacher expressed the view that as professional ABE teachers, there shouldn't be the need to go to such lengths with audit compliance, because as professionals, they trust each other:

Things like assessment validation really make us angry, because we have professional staff, people who have been teaching for a long time and they do come with a pretty sound theoretical basis ... we don't go over the top about things because there's a trust.

Another teacher said she found the whole process of checking and validating her work quite 'belittling', 'you know, like 15 years of practical experience under your belt you feel pretty confident and OK', but not trusted to work autonomously. Other teachers resented spending so much of their non-teaching time doing validation and accountability work at the expense of developing resources and preparing for their classes.

Perhaps the most unfortunate consequence of constant audit work was the wearing down of enthusiasm for their work. Several head teacher comments illustrated this:

A growing sense of not being able to complete work to a satisfactory level – unfortunately a sense of not caring.

I was always passionate about working in TAFE because of the opportunities it gave me and what it did. Now I am increasingly disillusioned ...

I believe the mentoring of staff, my mental health and my enthusiasm have all departed. It is a daily slog ...

As explained in the methods section, the head teacher data in this paper were drawn from a much larger study of head teachers in TAFE NSW (Black 2009). The above comments regarding disillusionment with their role appear to be quite widespread, and they have implications for the morale of the teaching workforce in TAFE generally.

### Getting the balance right

So far in these findings the central theme has been discontent with how the audit regime operates and the negative impact it has had on ABE pedagogy and the professionalism and morale of the teachers. What has not featured is how ABE teacher agency plays a role, and how these teachers attempt to work within a highly regulating audit culture, but without sacrificing their skills and values as ABE professionals. How these teachers balanced their own teaching philosophies and practices with the often competing demands for audit compliance, varied for individual teachers.

It was the focus groups that provided insights into these issues, and selected quotes from individual teachers are used in this section to indicate the perspectives of these teachers. Some teachers explained that the needs of students have always come first and the needs of the curriculum second. As one teacher said, 'We've never looked at the units first and gone along and delivered.' Another teacher explained, 'We've become sharper about the accountability, even though we are still flexible and we do it the way we think is best for the student.' In fact, there appeared to be two realities operating, an official one and an unofficial one, both in opposition to one other, and the teachers were expected to navigate their way through. As a head teacher explained in a focus group:

We're getting mixed messages. We're saying we've got accountability, but teachers are saying, well, I haven't got enough time to deliver these units. And then on top of that we're saying (*and this was said in a whisper*), 'don't worry about that'... So that's mixed messages ... we want you to be accountable, but don't get anal about it.

The responses of ABE teachers to audit compliance seemed to vary, depending on the personal convictions of the teacher, and to some extent the culture, or what can be termed the 'community of practice' (Wenger 1998) operating within the ABE sections in particular colleges. There were some teachers who basically denied that audits had any significant role to play or made any difference to what and how they taught (the *deniers*). For example, in response to a question on whether curriculum learning outcomes made any difference to how they teach, one teacher responded: 'Not to me. I just have to do a lot more paperwork around it.' Another teacher, when asked if she felt some sort of obligation to meet the learning outcomes of the curriculum, stated: 'I don't. Give me a box, I'll tick the box, I'll tick it. I'm not going to be driven to teach by what that says there.' Thus for these teachers, while audits could not be ignored altogether, they refused to acknowledge their importance, and instead they trivialised them.

Another form of denying the importance of the regulatory mechanisms of audit compliance was to take the risk that you wouldn't be audited, and in the worst case scenario, that of being audited, be prepared to manufacture at short notice what was required in the audit. This seems to be implicit in the following comment which was underpinned by the conviction of the ABE teachers that they were nevertheless doing a good job in their primary role of meeting the needs of students and enterprises:

If someone comes along and does an audit, we either have to have advanced notice to fix it (*laughing in the focus group*) or you have to be able to argue it ... you know, you've got what the student needs, what the company needs, you've got the TAFE units, and if it ain't accurate, something's got to give, and I'd rather it give TAFE-wise ... You take the risk that you're not going to be audited that year, or you take the risk that, you know, you can write it the day before.

The above examples indicate that some teachers were prepared to subvert the audit processes if these processes conflicted with what they considered were the greater interests of their students and other stakeholders. Many of the teachers in the focus groups, however, took what might suitably be described as a *pragmatic* approach to audit compliance. There were auditing procedures that were expected to be adhered to in their teaching programs, but they managed to deal with these almost as separate from their actual ABE pedagogy. For example, one teacher said, 'My teaching has not changed, and then half way through I'll think, oh my God, I should have done dah, dah, dah, dah and dah, so I will do something that will fit the criteria.' In other words, the audit work was an add-on which had to be undertaken but was considered to have little to do with 'real' ABE teaching. Another teacher similarly claimed:

I'll be honest with you, I'll throw in an assessment, but ... my assessments are specifically aimed to keep that side of things happy (*the auditors*). I'll do it in one session, tick the boxes. But the rest of the time I'll do what's needed.

Finally, of course, there were those who complied as best they could with the audit processes (the *compliers*). They were simply doing their job as ABE teachers subject to the same audit compliance as all other teachers in the VET system. For some teachers, however, the issue was a little sensitive. They wanted to do the right thing by their employers, and technically they had no choice but to comply, but they sometimes worked harmoniously in their community of practice with long standing ABE staff who adopted a different approach (the *deniers* or *pragmatists*). The following short dialogue between two teachers illustrates such a dilemma:

(teacher one): So far I've got no ticks in the box (laughs)

(teacher two): Well, what if you just tick them anyway?

(response by teacher one) I probably could, but some things I just can't. I've got to do some things related to it, even if it's one lesson.

In other words, this teacher was unable to be untruthful, even with pressure from her fellow colleagues. If she hadn't addressed a set of learning outcomes in her class, then she wasn't prepared to state otherwise and simply tick the boxes. Another teacher explained the situation facing teachers who were concerned that they should follow the correct procedures: 'You can get caught in it because you feel like, you know, you'll get into trouble.'

Individual teacher responses regarding how they accommodated or balanced the need for audit compliance with their own professional teaching philosophies and practices might best be seen as fitting along a continuum, which at one extreme ascribed little or no importance to audits, and at the other extreme, were as compliant as possible. Terms such as deniers, pragmatists and compliers are used in this paper as broad descriptors only, and not as part of a definitive typology.

### **The future of ABE pedagogy in VET**

The ABE teachers in the focus groups were asked their views about the future of ABE pedagogy in VET. One of the key concerns of the teachers was the impending retirement of many ABE teachers in the next few years and the implications this would have for ABE pedagogy. One teacher stated:

There's going to be a vacuum and I'm worried about what's going to fill that vacuum. There won't be enough of us with all of the knowledge that we've got to keep what's special about it.

There was concern in particular that younger teachers, and those new to the ABE field, may be more accommodating of the audit culture. The following ABE teacher comments clearly convey these concerns:

If you came in as a young person, I think starting out, then you'd be handed these assessment tasks that you have to meet, and so that's where you'd be coming from.

The induction for a new teacher is, here are your learning outcomes, this is your CLAMS roll (a computerised roll), and these are what you have to tick off for assessment validation.

There was concern that these new teachers 'will only know this (audit culture).' Some teachers linked these developments to the recent minimum qualification to teach in Australian VET, the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. Formerly, new teachers to VET were required to undertake a teaching degree qualification, usually from a higher education institution, and in fact, the majority of current full time ABE teachers have first degrees plus post graduate teaching qualifications. One teacher, for example, explained how these new teachers without teaching degrees were likely to lack a 'philosophy' of education:

... they're not teacher trained, and they are very much, teacher talk, stand in front of the room, pass out worksheets ... and that's what we are concerned about the Cert IV people coming in, if they don't have a philosophy of education.

On a broader, more optimistic note though, some teachers expressed the view that 'our day has arrived' in VET. They considered that only ABE teachers had the flexibility to teach the 'foundation' skills in VET that are currently needed and are being promoted by a new federal government (see Gillard 2009). It was precisely because ABE teachers seemed to have the ability to move beyond the prescribed curriculum and to deliver negotiated and tailored courses, that ABE teachers were so valued. As one teacher explained in relation to some workplace programs:

They've got workers who can't pass the test, but who do they go to in TAFE to get people up to that higher level? There is nobody else. There isn't a course that teaches, you know, Year 10 Advanced maths in 8 weeks, and communication skills to get through an interview.



## Conclusions

There are limitations to this paper in so far as the data were based on the selected comments of thirteen head teachers of ABE and recorded discussions in three focus groups totalling approximately thirty ABE teachers. It is thus not appropriate to attempt to generalise the findings to larger cohorts of ABE teachers. Nevertheless, on the basis of these data, it has been shown that some ABE teachers are finding it difficult to work as required within the regulatory mechanisms of the VET audit culture, and they are finding various ways of teaching that operate along a continuum of resistance and accommodation to this culture. Many opt for a form of compromise, referred to as a *pragmatic* approach, in which they try to teach according to their perceptions of 'good' ABE pedagogy principles, but yet at the same time try to satisfy, at least in a minimal way, the requirements of various audit procedures. By means of subterfuge and pragmatism these teachers can be seen to be subverting the audit culture in so far as they are not engaging with audit compliance in the spirit in which it is intended. Instead, audit work is often an 'add-one', paperwork usually requiring extra work time which is reluctantly undertaken just to please the auditors.

What the findings clearly show is that ABE teacher agency continues to play a role. Quite a few of the teachers teach, or at least try to teach, as they always have in ABE, notwithstanding the extra paperwork required for auditors. The issue for these teachers is essentially whether the best interests of their students are being served by the current audit culture, and if not, they are prepared to work outside of these requirements to varying degrees ('underground working' according to Hodkinson 2008). These teachers can be seen to be 'working the interstices', the spaces that still exist for them to undertake what they consider to be 'good' ABE teaching.

Some ABE teachers, head teachers in particular, appear to be growing weary of the continued stress of trying to maintain what they believe in as ABE professionals whilst also managing the constant pressures of audit compliance. The result in some cases is disillusionment and occasionally a loss of enthusiasm which may have serious implications for the morale of their teaching sections. Adding to this negativity is the realisation that many current ABE teachers are at the latter end of their teaching careers. There was concern expressed among these current ABE teachers that those who will replace them in coming years may not share the same principles and beliefs of ABE pedagogy and thus may more readily accede to the demands for audit compliance. New ABE teachers may not be prepared to 'work the interstices.' They may not even be aware that there are interstices to be worked.

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